

November 2019

Dear All,

This letter tells the story of our 2019 trip to Australia, primarily to New South Wales.

Firstly though, we have some news from Hope. Our biggest surprise was when Dave and Lorraine's house went up for sale. We hadn't seen any activity there since their son Shaun and his wife came out to turn off the water for winter. The house is still packed with their hoard and history and there is an ancient Lincoln in the driveway, plus three decrepit boats and assorted junk in the yard.



Rather than do any clean-up the family has chosen to sell it “as is”, so any buyer has to do their own clean-up. The realtor's web pages begin with views of the river but end with pictures of rooms full of junk but missing parts of walls and ceilings. It's for sale at \$299000, which would be about the value of the lot if it wasn't right next to the bridge..

We'd been doing the usual winter preparation: antifreeze into the camper's tanks and snow tyres on the Jeep. We had a succession of wind storms, ripping off some more shingles, so we had our handyman back to glue them down. He also fixed one of our downspouts that got blown away; the guttering system came with a really good warranty but it's not much help when the company's out of business!

Thursday October 31st

We had lunch with Bob and Pat in Chilliwack and then headed in to Vancouver Airport. Our flight wasn't until around midnight so we had a really early check-in. My laptop's battery was only good for about 20 minutes so I sat by a charging pole so I could plug in. After 20 minutes it powered off so I moved to another pole where people were already plugged in, but it didn't start up, so I thought I'd be carrying a laptop with a failed charging circuit board all the way to Australia. An hour later somebody sat down next to me, plugged in his phone, and complained “this one's dead too”. I told him he'd made my day. All the charging poles in the terminal were dead. My laptop battery was flat but chargeable.

We left at around midnight on Thursday and arrived on Saturday morning; Friday never really happened as we crossed the date line, moving on a day. Total flight time was around 16 hours, our longest ever, but not the longest in the world; the current record is held by a flight from Newark to Perth at over nineteen hours.

Both of us had back pain and I had leg pain too, like a rat was gnawing my calf, so we didn't get much sleep; I got to watch a lot of bad movies.

Saturday November 2nd

When we landed in Melbourne we were told that one of our passengers was ill and would have to be checked out by medical staff before we were allowed to disembark. There was some speculation that if the passenger turned out to be infected with the dreaded lurgi we might all be shipped back to Canada. Luckily we were all allowed in; but Edna and John were kept waiting for another hour; an expensive hour at Melbourne's exorbitant parking rates.

The weather in Melbourne had been 35C (95F) a couple of days before but now it was a cool steady drizzle, closer to what we're used to anyway.

I was trying to stay dry as we walked to the ramp and I realized that even with my limping, shambling walk I was leaving John behind. His back has deteriorated a lot since we last saw him in 2015. He said it had got worse recently; he was a lot better on last year's trip to England. Apart from that they both looked to be doing well; John looked to have lost some weight, but it's tough to keep it off when you have visitors.

It stayed wet and dark all the way through Melbourne to Mulgrave; the area hadn't changed much in four years but there was a new house across the road. All their immediate neighbours are now Vietnamese and most of the others also come from Asian countries.

John and Edna both have hearing aids and Sandie had an ear infection which was making her deaf. With three deafies and one mumblor (me) it was going to be a month of misunderstandings, particularly with the background noise of driving at highway speeds.

The kids and grandkids were all doing well; more information about them later as we'd be seeing them all we hoped.

Edna's cousin Grace, who'd come to Australia before they did, had died just a few weeks earlier, but Grace's husband Tony is still alive.

Which brought up the question of where we'd be going. The original plan was to visit the national parks around the border of New South Wales and Queensland; they are mostly mountainous rain forest, usually warm and damp with a wide array of plants and wildlife. On our last trip to the area in 2010 we'd had to bypass most of the parks because of extensive flooding. On that trip we'd also run out of time and not been able to visit Fraser Island, so for this trip we made that our target and turn around point.

However, John had warned us a few weeks earlier that the area was now afflicted by a really bad drought. Every year since those 2010 floods had been low on rainfall and many places had empty reservoirs. There were large fires burning even though it was only early spring. The situation had not improved since then and there were now road closures and evacuations in the worst-hit areas. We decided to go visit the family in Lakes Entrance and in Sydney and then decide what to do.

This was going to be our first trip to Australia without a camper; our Troopie was sold after our 2015 trip. This time we were all going to be traveling with John and Edna in their Mitsubishi Outlander, and staying in motels, not as much fun as camping, but easier on the body. The Mitsubishi has four wheel drive, but it doesn't have the clearance so we'd have to be less ambitious on rocks and sand and water crossings.

The weather stayed wet and cold so even though the pool was ready to use, no one felt like swimming. John braved the weather to barbecue for us. We stayed awake long enough to partly overcome jet lag, but I don't remember much beyond enjoying dinner.

Sunday November 3rd

We had a bright start to the day but showers soon rolled in. Birds showed up the screen door for breakfast, magpies and miner birds, tapping on the glass to get our attention. Australia's magpies are large, aggressive birds, but they have the sweetest song, easily identified in Australian movies.

Robert and family live in Rowville, a few miles from Mulgrave, and they came to see us that morning. Robert is still a professor at Monash University, teaching civil engineering. He rarely gets to travel for his job these days but says he's happy to stay home with the family. Amanda has a house-cleaning business.

Caitlin is now 16 and about to take her year-end exams. She then has one more year of school and hopes to go to university, probably studying medical subjects. The real surprise though was Hayley, who'd looked like a miniature version of Amanda four years ago but now at only 13 towers over both her mother and sister, close to Robert's height. She takes after her Aunt and Granddad.



They were all looking forward to their Christmas holiday vacation in Apollo Bay on the south coast. They stay at a campground with plenty of activities to keep the girls happy.



the Dandenongs; I'd seen the trains while driving but never up close. Despite its frivolous name it was once part of a railway system connecting Melbourne to outlying communities. Today it is a thriving narrow-gauge heritage railway with numerous steam and diesel locomotives and rolling stock.

After lunch the weather dried up; was there anywhere we wanted to visit around Melbourne? I chose Puffing Billy, the tourist train that operates in





It was too late in the day to ride in the trains, but we drove to Belgrave, which has stations for both Melbourne's Metro Trains' broad gauge electric trains and Puffing Billy. Access to the platforms was free so we watched a couple of trains returning from excursions with copious emissions of smoke and steam. Luckily the rain held off until we were walking back to the car. This skink was comfortably perched in a railway wall.

John and Edna said their garden had suffered while they were away in Queensland for the winter, but it still looked pretty good to us.

Monday November 4th

It was another bright morning, but the weather forecast was dismal, rain all afternoon. I suggested going to the Healesville Sanctuary, really a zoo of Australian animals. The animals are mainly outside but I remembered there were some indoor exhibits, though not nearly enough as it turned out.



We had lunch in Healesville at a bakery, an expected location for cafes in Australia. The rain began as soon as we entered the sanctuary, but we tried to ignore it.



We were most interested in those animals we haven't seen in the wild, like cassowaries and bilbies and Tasmanian devils and tree kangaroos, but it was good to see others in close-up. The first we saw were this cassowary and a pair of emus.



As usual it was the birds that were the stars, easier to see than most of the marsupials. This ibis is relatively common in Australia but always catches our eye as its bill is so distinctive. It's curved so the ibis can probe for its favourite food, crayfish, but as you can see the bill makes drinking difficult

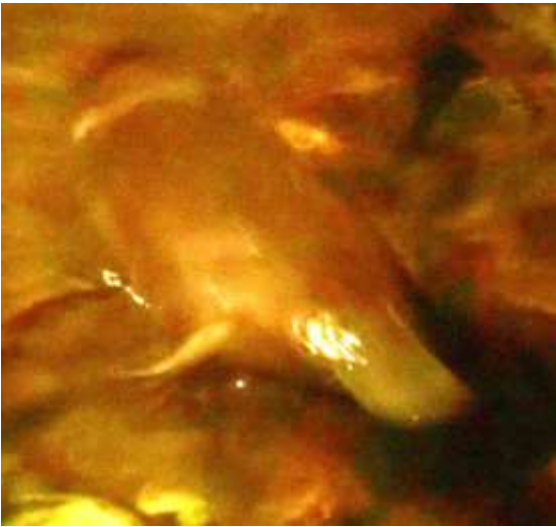


The colourful birds below are the green parrot, emerald dove, and the galah. Below are a white-headed pigeon, a lyre bird, and a brolga.



It was noticeable that kangaroos don't like to be out in the rain any more than we do and they were mostly gathered under their shelters. The one on the left is a tree kangaroo.





There were a couple of inside exhibits for the platypus and for other nocturnal marsupials. Both were lit for the animals' comfort rather than the photographer's so there were no clear pictures. The platypus looks like



a diving duck as it hunts for yabbies (crayfish); their skeletons littered the pool. The bilbies and similar marsupials were a little easier to see, illuminated by a dim red light. I've filtered most of the red light here to show the bilby's cute ears. The Aussies have an Easter Bilby rather than an Easter Bunny.

Outside, the rain got heavier and the sky darker, obscuring the colours of the birds. We had a good view of the koalas and the Tasmanian devils; they don't



seem bothered by the rain. This koala bore a startling resemblance to the late English comedian Charlie Drake.



The reptiles had their own area in the dry and warm. I've patched a few of their images into this composite, but I don't know them well enough to identify them all.

Despite the rain we stuck it out until closing time and still hadn't seen it all. The same thing had happened to us on our first visit in 1995 and our second with Karen and Stew in 2002.

John and Edna look as damp as they did when they came to

BC for the Alaska Trip.



We went for dinner at the Sandown Greyhound Racing Club. The road was torn up so we had to detour to get there, and then we found out that the road had been torn up because the club had no water, and the restaurant was closed. Instead we went to the nearby Highways club. We were to eat at many similar places over the next month: golf and bowling and servicemen's clubs. Although locals have to be members to eat and



drink there, visitors just need to declare that they live out of town; some clubs have machines to read driving licenses and verify non-residence.

I guess that these places grew out of England's social clubs, with the Australians adding a restaurant and casino (called the Pokies). Meals have to be ordered at the desk but the staff deliver them to the table. Prices of meals and drinks are a bit lower than regular restaurants, and in many smaller towns the club may be the only place for an evening meal. Cuisine is usually Chinese, sometimes with a limited choice of western meals. Some have senior's meals, but we found even these to be too large for us and Sandie and I were soon sharing our dinners.

Tuesday November 5th

This was Guy Fawkes Day in England but no longer celebrated in Australia; probably just as well as they have enough bush fires without having the population setting off fireworks and starting some more. It was however Melbourne Cup Day, a holiday in Victoria to celebrate the horse race, but we were headed out of Melbourne away from the race course traffic.

We had another bright morning, but a forecast of rain showers and possibly snow above 3500 feet, not a problem for our drive along the coast, but possibly later in the week when we'd be driving through the Snowy Mountains to Sydney. It was a reminder that this was only Spring.

We were off to stay with John's brother Philip and Lynda in the little township of Lake Bunga, just past the bigger town of Lakes Entrance, on the south coast about 200 miles east of Melbourne. We drove on the motorway and the Princes Highway through farming country, with low mountains on the northern horizon. It was pleasant but unexciting scenery, new to us until we reached Sale, where we'd been in 2000 on our way back to Sydney.

We stopped for lunch in Bairnsdale, picked a café, and then walked in the wrong door. This other café's menu wasn't all that appetizing, but we persevered and then regretted it, not a great meal.

Lakes Entrance is about 25 miles further, the point where the Mitchell River and the extensive Gippsland Lakes drain into the Bass Strait, the stretch of sea between Victoria and Tasmania. The turnoff to Lake Bunga is a few miles beyond, and we found the house in a court high above the lake.



Rocks and flowers decorate their steep driveway, which drops down to garages and the bungalow. It has three bedrooms on the side and a kitchen/dining room leading to a living room looking out over the back garden. Beyond are trees around the lake and more distant, a corner of the beach and the sea.

The house looked great, with almost everything new. They'd bought the house from the previous owner after Phil retired and they moved from Cranbourne near Melbourne. They'd added another garage and built a courtyard. That's where we went to get away from the strong wind coming off the sea. The end result is impressive; they have a lovely home.



Phil had been ill in the last year with kidney stones, complicated by an enlarged prostate. He'd had to come back to Melbourne for the operation and had had a rough time of it. He says he's recovered well though.



Lynda is younger and she's still working, handling the accounts at a car dealership in Bairnsdale. However, she doesn't think she's paid enough for the responsibility and hours and the travel involved so she's looking for something local. The problem of course is that Lakes Entrance is a small town with few good jobs.



Lynda's daughters Caitlyn and Meagan, now in their 20s, remain in the Melbourne area, both with their partners and their partners' children. Phil and Lynda have quite taken to Caitlyn's partner's little boy Arlie who's five. Lynda likes where they live but doesn't like being so far away from her family.

Phil's son Mark is now a head chef, working in the Melbourne area. His daughter Anaya is now 14 and comes to stay with them occasionally.

They have two lovable and boisterous dogs, Ruby and Willow.

We went out to look at the view. Phil had relandscaped the back garden and rebuilt the retaining walls; he said they'd all been at strange angles. They have no neighbours behind them, just a steep drop down to the trees around the lake, which he said was brackish, occasionally given a dose of salt when storms cut through the beach and join the lake with the sea. We had a distant view of large birds in the trees: herons and eagles.

We went into Lakes Entrance for dinner, at the Bowling Club I think.

Wednesday November 6th

Lynda was off to work that morning and the rest of us went down to the beach end of the lake. Phil said it was walkable, but a stiff climb back up to the house through the bush, so we drove. The lake is popular with birds: a line of cormorants drying, some black ducks dabbling, and sea eagles soaring.





We crossed a low dune and found ourselves on the sea shore, part of 90-mile beach. We were looking out on the Bass Strait, often wild with massive waves but peaceful that day despite a strong breeze. Far offshore we could see the derricks of the Gippsland oil and gas fields. Behind the sand and shell beach was the forest. It's a dramatic piece of scenery but without much variation. We set off walking towards a headland to the east. I'm not sure what our plan was as neither John nor I was going to get there, let alone make it back, but the rain came in time and turned us around.



Back at the house, Phil was on the phone with Lynda's Uncle Mick, who lives in the area. I heard a mention of "s'arvo", which is Australian for "this afternoon". The Aussies seem determined to shorten their words; you'd think there was a tax on syllables.

Phil and John wanted to spread their Mum's ashes. Auntie Eileen has been in the urn for a decade now so it was definitely time. Uncle Mick has a boat and the plan was to spread her ashes in the river, so we were going to meet up s'arvo at his mooring place. There was a line of cormorants there too but these were having to dig their claws in to avoid being blown off their perches by the wind.



It was a very windy afternoon with choppy water so neither of the ladies wanted to be on the boat and they set off to find a coffee shop. I recognized Mick as the character playing Merlin at Phil and Lynda's wedding in Camelot. Mick had trouble lining the boat up to the dock in the wind. He explained that his boat is 110 years old and its diesel engine has limited power.



We were in the North Arm, one of the lakes of Lakes Entrance, and we were motoring out towards the Mitchell River. There were fumes coming from the engine, but Phil and Mick explained that it was only their pop-can repair of the exhaust system coming apart, nothing to worry about. However, as we passed into the river's flow the fumes got a lot worse and the engine died. The flow and the wind soon drove us towards a breakwater's rocks and Phil leapt onto the rocks to hold the boat away.

We managed to get the attention of a passing boat and with some difficulty the crew got a line to us and towed us away from the rocks.



We explained what we had been trying to do and they were kind enough to tow us around in a circle so John could spread the ashes. Of course, with a wind and choppy water, the ashes went in all

directions, and we probably all inhaled some. I'm sure if Auntie was watching our antics she had a good giggle.

They towed us to a public mooring on the South Arm and Mick began tinkering with the engine and soon realized that he'd been so concerned about the wind that he'd forgotten to turn on the water pump that cools the engine. John and I walked the few streets to the North Arm and found the ladies. Phil and Mick managed to cool the engine enough to restart it; no permanent damage they thought. They were able to motor back to the North Arm. We'd been lucky; an hour later and the tide would have turned, adding its flow to the river and we might have been shot out to sea.



Lynda came home after a long day at work sick with a migraine, so she went to bed while the rest of us went the RSL, a servicemen's club, for another Chinese meal.

Thursday November 7th

Lynda was partly recovered and went to work. Phil and Sandie were off to Bairnsdale too, Phil for car taxes, Sandie to find some cold medicine for her ear.



It was sunny and windy still as John took us further along the highway towards Nowa Nowa and then the gravel roads to Stony Creek trestle bridge, a relic of the Bairnsdale to Orbost Railway. It's over a hundred years old and too dangerous to cross but it's an impressive sight, towering 70 feet above the valley.



Nearby was Costicks Weir, a small dam creating a pond in the creek. We couldn't see what it was for, but have since learned that it was created to give a reliable water supply for fighting fires and protecting the trestle.



Today the pond attracts wildlife. This kookaburra was laughing at us and Phil captured this picture of a goanna below the weir.





On our way back we stopped at Lake Tyers, another lake protected from the ocean's surf by sand dunes.



From there we took the beach road back to Lake Bunga, and Phil showed us the town's claim to fame; it was the site of the oil well, drilled back in the 1920s, that subsequently led to discovery of the offshore oil and gas fields.



Lynda had recovered so we all went out for dinner, back to the RSL for more Chinese food. Phil set us up for this rare family photo.

Friday November 8th

We had a clear and cool morning as we set off for Carolyn and Jason's in the Sydney area. John had thought we'd take a scenic route through the Snowy Mountains, but even the shortest route involved eight hours of driving, so that's what we chose. Sandie was still not allowed to drive, and there was some doubt about whether John's insurance would cover me as an elderly foreigner so neither of us drove. I wasn't keen to anyway as eyes and reactions aren't as good as they were, but John ended up doing a lot of driving.

We had come away without any maps for anywhere except the state of Victoria but Phil found us an old map of New South Wales and I spent a few hours on the NSW Fire Service web site going down the list of active fires and closed roads and marking their location on the map. It looked like we'd have to give up the coastal route and possibly find an inland route

up the Thunderbolt Highway and through Glen Innes, but the situation seemed to be getting worse.

Phil and Lynda were heading into Melbourne for the weekend; they were going to Caitlyn's for Arley's birthday party.



We continued along the Princes Highway and crossed the Snowy River, famous for the movie, though that was set in the mountainous area, further north. We turned north at McCann River and climbed into the hills and crossed into New South Wales. We found these skinks living in their log condo and surveying us from their balconies.



We stopped at the Bombala platypus reserve, but it was probably too late in the morning for platypus to be about, and the wind was stirring up the water too. It was a great spot for birds though and we got this view of a tawny



frogmouth, an unusual owl-like bird. We'd probably have stayed longer if it hadn't been so cold and windy.



As we climbed into the hills, the scenery looked similar to parts of Wyoming; South Pass, though not as high, about 3000 feet. We had

lunch in Cooma, in a little bakery by the roundabout, and then plugged on towards Sydney, sometimes slowly because of Friday afternoon traffic

Carolyn and Jason's house is in the suburb of Cherrybrook on the north side of Sydney, a hilly area with lots of trees. It's a 4-bedroom detached with three floors, about 40 years old, and sitting on a large lot, about the size of ours back in White Bear Lake, a quarter acre. The back yard has a two-level deck and a swimming pool, a basketball hoop, and a chicken coop with chickens (Chooks to the Aussies).





Jason works for Sydney Water, a government-owned corporation. He recently had a trip to India, somewhere to the east of Mumbai, to visit some IT developers that do work for him. He also got to visit a school and bring them paper, pens, and pencils. He obviously enjoyed the trip despite the poverty and traffic. He had his own driver for the trip, a man who slept in the car until he was needed.



Carolyn had given up her water management job when the babies started arriving, as paying for three in daycare would have wiped out her salary. She preferred to enjoy her children. She's recently taken over a friend's ironing business, which allows her to work at home.

When we last saw them in 2010 on our way to Cape York, they were all small and Mitchell was a newborn. They've grown into attractive kids.



Rylea is 12 and at high school and a swimming star, off to the pool at 4 am for practice 4 days a week. Maddison was scooting around on her bum last time we saw her; her Mum says she walked soon after that. She's a keen netball player. Mitchell's now into basketball and chess. He seems to bounce around the house; painful to watch! He looks a lot like Macaulay Culkin (Home Alone) and he knows all the script too!

We briefly sat outside enjoying the warmth, but retreated inside to eat our pizzas when a cool breeze came up. They'd had a couple of bad smoky days from the fires to the west, in the Blue Mountains, but the breeze was in a good

direction for us.

John and Edna slept in the basement while Sandie and I shared what's usually Mitchell's room. It had been a long day for John.

Saturday November 9th
Rylea was competing in three races at Sydney's Metro North East summer championships so we all went the pool to watch. As you can see from the pictures, it is quite a pool! The complex was built for the 2000 Olympics and the races were in a 50 metre pool, 10 lanes wide, with electronic scoring and



cameras, and seating for thousands of spectators.

John and I couldn't help comparing it to the grotty, over-chlorinated North Road Baths we used to go to in Brighton when we were kids.

One of the other pools was set up with slides and a big tipping pot, and that kept Maddison and Mitchell happy for the hours we were there. There were dozens of other heats between Rylea's.



The competition's organization was slick. At the end of a heat, the racers would stay in their lanes until the next heat's racers had dived in to start their heat. There was usually less than a minute's down time.



Rylea was in individual breast and freestyle heats and swam the butterfly leg in a medley relay.

She won a couple of her heats, but there's no final, just an ordering of four or five heats based on time, and she was well placed in all of them. She was happy to get a couple of personal competition bests, even though she had gone faster in practice.



This was one of Rylea's winning scoreboards.



2019 MNE Summer Champs F11-12yrs 100 m Freest				
Event: 036 Heat: 2				
1	[Redacted], Rylea	CARL	1:10.44	9
2	Boden, Gemma	ABBT	1:10.80	7
3	Bonasera, Andie	NBSC	1:11.26	4
4	Walton, Violet	NBSC	1:11.33	3
5	Croll, Jessica	WILB	1:11.64	5
6	Smith, Keira	KNXP	1:11.77	6
7	Tan, Leisel	ABBT	1:12.23	1
8	Marschner, Eloise	RAVN	1:12.52	0
9	Klineberg, Isabel	LCOV	1:12.57	2



After Rylea's last heat, we went to the nearby Kuring-gai Chase National Park. The park has steep forested hills dropping down to inlets from the sea, with plentiful land and sea-based wildlife. We saw this brush turkey building his massive nest and also this good-sized skink. We were

walking on a rocky, hilly trail, looking for wildlife, and found these flowers as well.



The kids enjoyed a playground and fed the fish at the harbor until we got hungry too.





We ended up at a Malaysian restaurant. The place was packed on a Saturday night and we had no reservation, but somehow they found us a table for nine and served up the food quickly. It was of course yet another Chinese menu plus a few Malaysian items. They also came up with a complimentary orange desert for us all, a good experience.



Sunday November 10th

We were tempted to stay another day, but we wanted to get past a few of those fires while we still could. Jason took Rylea back to the pool for two more races. We said our thanks to Carolyn and our goodbyes and headed off soon afterwards.

We'd plotted a route between the existing fires. The coast road was surrounded by fires in the Port Macquarie area so we took the A1 road north towards Gloucester. Along the way we spotted this blue-

faced honeyeater; the first time I ever saw the species I called them Disney birds because they behaved like cartoon characters. There were also these beautiful jacaranda trees, originally from Argentina, but now all over Australia's east coast.



In Gloucester we bought some rolls and found a park for a picnic lunch. Centerpiece for the park is this beautiful mosaic platypus. Our biggest surprise though was when a tiny kangaroo came hopping around our picnic table.

The owner explained that Violet was an orphan she'd been feeding and raising. In a few months she would be weaned and then released to the wild, as adult kangaroos are difficult to manage. The lady was concerned because the roo kept going back to a pile of French fries that someone had spilled. Junk food is bad for kangaroos.

She asked me to hold her still while they got packed up. She opened up a tiny bag and Violet hopped in, folded herself up, and sat on my lap with just her head and one leg protruding. They were heading north like us but they were going back to their house; they'd been evacuated because of the fires. They didn't know yet if their house had survived.

After that encounter I was thinking about whether we should even try to get into areas where people were losing their homes. But we continued north on the Thunderbolts Highway. The countryside looked dry, yellow and brown, and rivers were either dry or just a set of puddles; it looked more like the end of summer than the beginning. We were seeing smoke over to the east and then we came to an area that had burned in the last few days, with smoking debris on both sides of the road.



We came to Walcha, looking for the visitor's centre but it was closed. We stopped in the park to eat some cake that Carolyn had given us, and decided Walcha was a reasonable place to stay. We rented two rooms at the Walcha Motel which turned out to be typical of the motels we'd use for the next two weeks. For about 100 Australian dollars (\$90 Canadian, 70\$ US) we'd get a room with a TV and a queen bed, small bathroom, tiny kitchen, fridge, toaster, tea, coffee, milk and WiFi. Things had changed; in this area in 2010 we'd had to use libraries to get an Internet connection; few people even knew what WiFi was.

John and Edna had come home this way from their Queensland trip and they remembered they'd seen platypus nearby, so we set off for quick look, but we were slowed down by parrots and magpies and kangaroos, even a flock of ducks on the road. This river still had water but it was barely flowing, so we hadn't much hope. Sandie and I didn't see any but John and Edna spotted one in the distance; it dived as soon as we got back. And then the light faded. On our way back a kangaroo hopped into the side of the car, without damage to either we hoped.

There were few places to eat in town, even fewer open late, but we found a restaurant at the back of the New England Hotel, a classic Aussie pub, with a real bunch of characters. They'd stagger into the restaurant from the bar to pick up their Chinese take-aways – yes, we were having another Chinese meal! The characters ranged from the tiny guy with a tiny head and gigantic hat to a bunch that looked like extras from a Mad Max movie. The cook looked to be Chinese but none of our meals tasted as we expected; not bad, just different.

The map said we were still around 600 miles from Fraser Island, depending on how many parks we stopped at on our way. But things were getting worse and I had to add a couple more fires and closed roads to the map.

Monday November 11th

We woke up to the smell of smoke and the light from a yellow sky. The TV news was warning of “catastrophic” fire conditions for Tuesday, a combination of temperatures up near 100F and very high winds.

Sydney and the Hunter Valley were areas of extreme danger, OK for us as we were past both, but a worry for Carolyn and family.

The people in the north were dealing with evacuations, homes gone, and even some deaths, so they didn't need a bunch of tourists adding to their problems. We gave up on trying to reach Fraser Island. Instead we would head west across the Outback to Broken Hill, a mining town we'd never been to, though we had been close by in 2004. There are some interesting parks along the way, including the Warrumbungles, but very different from the rainforest we'd hoped to see. We'd be going into drier, near desert conditions, with less left to burn, we hoped.



This was our first really warm day, sunny, smoky, and about 30C, mid 80s F. We went back to the river, still looking for platypus. One surprise was a large orange goldfish, probably an abandoned pet. Sandie and John spotted another platypus and Sandie got a short video and this distant picture.

There was a good variety of birds too, a nice place to camp if we were still camping. This large pied cormorant was perched above the river and this superb fairy wren was hopping around on the bridge.

We continued west to Gunnedah, where we picked up info on the area's parks and then Coonabarabran where we found a nice town park for afternoon coffee. We stopped at the visitor's centre for a list of motels and saw a notice that the nearby parks were closed because of the fire risk and then we realized that the closure applied to nearly all the parks in New South Wales. Even if we had continued driving north there wouldn't have been any point, nothing to see.

We chose the Matthew Flinders Hotel, named for a famous explorer of Australia. Unfortunately Sandie and I found out that our room had not been made up; there were dirty towels and sheets on the floor. With Filipino-speaking staff it took a while to get allocated another room.



We went to eat in the bistro at the Imperial Hotel in town. We were happy to break the sequence of Chinese meals, and my bangers and mash went down well.

The TV continued to warn of catastrophic weather feeding the fires.

Tuesday November 12th



We set off on another warm morning. These king parrots were in the shrubs around the motel. As expected, the park was closed but the road that goes through part of it was open so we looked at what we could at the roadside stops. We saw kangaroos and emus, and got a view of some of the park's spectacular volcanic relics. The side roads into the park were all locked, a shame as the park's skyline is quite a sight: a line of twisted volcanic spires. But I doubt that we could have repeated the 1000 step climb we did last time we were there in 2010.



Just outside the park we came to a field with hundreds of emus, an emu farm with paddocks for different ages. In the far distance we could see Dad emus with their chicks in tow.

We had lunch in Warren in a café. We ended up with a greasy pile of bacon and eggs. The quantity was good if not the quality.



We were now on the Mitchell Highway, heading into what is usually termed ‘the Outback’. In reality, most of Australia is Outback, but the term was first applied when NSW was farmed and the area beyond was regarded as unfarmable.

Some parts of the countryside around us had been farmed, but in

the absence of rain it had turned into fields of dust and we were now passing through dust storms and willy-willies, spinning columns of dust, called dust-devils in North America. It was now 37C and above, high nineties F.

The other sign of being in the Outback was the flies. Each time we stopped and got out we’d pick up a dozen or two tiny flies and they’d get into our eyes and ears and lips, anything to find moisture. They’d come back into the car with us. We’d lure them to the car windows and slowly lower the window and they’d be sucked out. There were extra points for raising the window at the last second and squashing them. By the time we got rid of all the flies it was usually time for another stop.



There were swaths of these pretty violet flowers, scaevola I think, along the roadside.

Another familiar sight was this group of paddy melons. These look like juicy grapefruit but they are dry and mildly poisonous, so nothing eats them. For some reason they like to grow on edges, so we saw them all along the railway track that paralleled the road.

Edna managed to contact Carolyn and get an update on their situation in Sydney. There were fires within a few miles of their house so they were keeping a watch out for drifting embers. Even the park we’d been in two days earlier Ku-ring-gai Chase was on fire. There was no evacuation yet in their area but she’d kept the kids home in case they had to leave in a hurry.



At Nyngan we switched to the Barrier Highway heading due west towards the Barrier Mountains, we made it as far as Cobar, a mining town. We turned down a couple of motels as too expensive. The Town and Country looked OK but John and Edna's room was missing its TV and fridge, presumably stolen. Another change of rooms.



We ate at the Cobar memorial service club, which advertised a schnitzel special with free wine. Even better as the server miscounted the vouchers. Not Chinese either!



The NSW Parks website showed that most of the far western parks were open, with just a few roads closed by rain; that was a surprise. The TV said that Sydney has survived the high winds better than expected; the winds had stayed high in the atmosphere, but now they were moving north into Queensland where fires had also been burning for months.

Wednesday November 13th

It was much cooler and the wind had dropped. We drove to the Old Reservoir, some rough country surrounding a pinkish lake.



We found a stumpy tail lizard and a striped snake of unknown species, perhaps a tiger snake.



There were not as many animals as the literature suggested but we saw magpies and willy wagtails, and the lake had a few spoonbills in the shallows.

The next town, Wilcannia, was only three hours down the road, but we were taking a side trip to Mount Grenfell, site of



some
Aborigine art.
Along the way
we saw this
dragon in the
road taking its
usual
defensive



action: freezing, not much use against an oncoming truck.

The dirt road had some soft spots, but was mostly good. There were puddles in a few places so at least this part of the country was still getting rain. We saw a few goannas; they run fast when threatened, a better defence.



This picture shows the countryside around Mount Grenfell, almost a desert but supporting shrubs and small trees. This savannah scenery may go on for hundreds of miles.





There was a walking trail from the parking area up into the rocky outcrops. The art was on the sloping ceilings of three rock shelters, now protected by an iron grid. This made the art difficult to see, so there were holes in the grid where we could poke our heads or camera, but only if we could get our heads down low enough.

Despite the difficulty the pictures were worth seeing, a mixture of humans and emus and kangaroos. There were also a few handprints, made by spraying ochre by mouth. Nearby was a large deep waterhole in amongst the rocks, which, along with the shelters, must have made this place a favoured place to stay.

It was a long drag to Wilcannia, mostly through savannah, red soil and a thin covering of scrawny acacia trees, but no ploughed fields so we didn't have any more dust storms. We crossed the Darling, a good-sized river with plenty of water, just before town.

There were two motels in town, one average and one less so, though only the latter had room for us. It was located in a dingy street behind the service station. Judging from the guard dogs and razor wire there was a crime problem in town. The main street had only a couple of shops still alive and they had grills over the windows.

Wilcannia was once an important part of the river trade, but now the only business seems to be as a country town for the surrounding sheep farmers, and as a bump in the road for the Barrier Highway

The evening was surprisingly cool. We ate at the Golf Club, the only place open in the evenings. The food was of course Chinese, but quite good. Back at the motel John and Edna settled into their room and found that it was really dirty, with blood-stained sheets, but by then the service station was closed and there was no one to complain to. They were getting most of the bad luck, as it was chance as to who picked up which set of keys.

Thursday November 14th

We were getting close to our target, Broken Hill, but thought we should check out some of the local national parks and scenery. The plan was to drive through Pardo-Darling national park to an opal-mining area called White Cliffs and then return through Mutawintji national park, another area with aborigine art. But the challenge was to find the right road. John had spotted a dirt road going off in the right direction, but after trying it for a while we realized that we were on the wrong side of the river and there was unlikely to be another bridge anywhere close. So we went back into town and tried again.

The next road had a sign that pointed to Wanaaring with a hint that a left turn somewhere would take us to White Cliffs, about 60 miles away, but it didn't say how far to the turn. Our maps were vague and the GPS didn't think any of these tracks were roads, so we were winging it.



The road was mostly quite good and wide except where it crossed cattle grids and streams. The streams had obviously cut the road in the last rain and it hadn't been graded since. We'd all driven roads like this all over Australia but it had mostly been in the Troopy 4wd camper, carrying at least a week's worth of food and water as well as a winch, sand mat, tools and parts, and sometimes a satellite phone. The Outlander had 4wd but apart from that we were pushing our luck!

However, we made it OK and the picture shows the last crossing before the White Cliffs which are just visible in the distance. Edna felt a bit battered; her back is sensitive to the bumps. We'd passed through a part of the Pardo-Darling park but it had looked no different from the rest of the drive. It was probably a case of the park service protecting a type of environment rather than an area of outstanding natural beauty.



White Cliffs turned out much as expected, a smaller version of the more famous Coober Pedy and Lightning Ridge opal capitals. There were places to dig for opals, and underground mines, houses, a motel, and restaurants. Unfortunately, most places seemed to be closed, and we ended up eating at the café behind the service station, as lovely as it sounds.



These cactus flowers provided a rare speck of beauty; the big picture isn't as pretty: a derelict caravan, broken machinery, shacks, and rocks, piles of rocks everywhere.

We drove up to the top of one of the mounds, above the white cliffs. The view emphasized how isolated



the spot is; nothing but near-desert to be seen.



We gave up on Mutawintji as it involved a long drive on dirt roads, probably as bumpy as what we'd driven that morning. Instead we took the alternative bitumen road almost back to Wilcannia and rejoined the Barrier Highway. (Bitumen is the Australian name for what the English call tarmac and the Americans call blacktop.)

We were about halfway through our four week vacation, so this is a convenient place to end Part 1 of our journal. Part 2 will cover our stay in Broken Hill and our return to Melbourne and our second trip to the Grampians and the Great Ocean Road.